



newsletter

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A Focus on Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to reading comprehension. Effective text comprehension cannot occur without the reader knowing what most of the words mean. Research has shown that a reader's general vocabulary may be the single best predictor of how well a reader will understand text. Although the TPRI does not directly assess vocabulary, it is an essential component of reading instruction that requires thoughtful planning and instruction. In the following sections, Dr. Jennifer Schnakenberg provides methods for effective vocabulary instruction for kindergarten through grade 3 and highlights the research behind these methods.

Why Do We Teach Vocabulary?

Vocabulary knowledge is the key that unlocks the meaning of text. Vocabulary knowledge improves comprehension and fluency in both reading and writing. Direct and explicit vocabulary instruction is an effective way for students to acquire vocabulary knowledge, thereby enhancing comprehension. In Kindergarten through English IV, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) includes a focus on vocabulary instruction and development.

What Is Vocabulary?

Vocabulary can be defined as *a list or collection of words or of words and phrases usually alphabetically arranged and explained or defined*. When we think of vocabulary instruction, we think about teaching words that make up speech (oral language) or text (both reading and writing) and their meanings.

There are two specific types of vocabularies to consider when planning instruction in early literacy: recognition or **receptive vocabulary** and productive or **expressive vocabulary**.

Receptive vocabulary includes those words students probably do not use on their own, but understand when spoken by others or when read.

Expressive vocabulary includes those words students use when they speak or write. Expressive vocabulary is typically not as well developed as receptive vocabulary.



This month, TPRI returns to our focus on the five key components of early reading instruction. Dr. Jennifer Schnakenberg is our February expert for **vocabulary**. Dr. Schnakenberg is Project

Director at the Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts at the University of Texas at Austin and Co-Principal Investigator for the Texas Literacy Initiative. Two of her research interests focus on interventions for students with reading difficulties at all ages and the impacts of professional development on teacher learning and student achievement.

Be sure to check out our March newsletter on **fluency** with guest author Ken Neiser, Project Manager of Tejas LEE at the University of Houston.

Experts Say ...

"Good vocabulary instruction helps children gain ownership of words, instead of just learning words well enough to pass a test. Good vocabulary instruction provides multiple exposures through rich and varied activities to meaningful information about the word."

Stahl & Kapinus, 2001, p. 14

"Immersing students in vocabulary-rich environments and providing instruction in words and word learning strategies can help develop greater depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge."

Brabham, E., Buskist, C., Henderson, S., Paleologos, T., Baugh, N. (2012). Flooding vocabulary gaps to accelerate word learning. *The Reading Teacher*, 65(8), p. 525.



What Is Vocabulary Instruction?

There are two specific ways to teach vocabulary to students: **indirect vocabulary instruction** and **direct vocabulary instruction**.

Indirect vocabulary instruction includes those opportunities when students are able to hear and use new and different vocabulary. Structured discussions and conversations with adults and peers are perfect occasions for students to engage with, hear, and try out new words. When students read or are read to, they have increased opportunities to encounter and engage with new vocabulary. Thus, listening to and reading a wide variety of text in multiple genres greatly improves students' vocabulary skills. In addition, fostering word consciousness by inviting students to become curious about words is a powerful way to encourage learning through indirect instruction. Word consciousness can be developed through the use of such teaching tools as content area word walls, word notebooks (where we would include new vocabulary, including definitions, illustrations, sentences, etc.), word jars, vivid descriptions, etc.

Direct vocabulary instruction includes explicit instruction of words through 1) use of an explicit vocabulary routine, 2) teaching words through the use of context, and 3) using models, demonstrations, illustrations, graphic organizers, and classroom discussions.

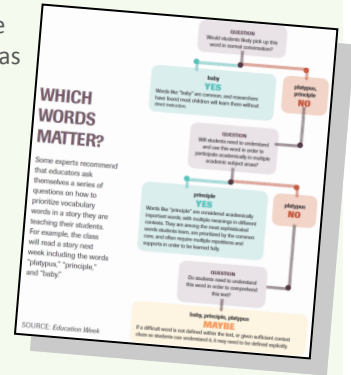
Teaching vocabulary directly builds students' knowledge of words, improving their reading comprehension. Teachers who actively teach vocabulary to students realize measurable gains in student comprehension of text.

Word Selection

When deciding which words to teach our students, we should consider the words in the text that students will need to understand in order to successfully comprehend. A great question to ask when **reviewing the text** and **planning** for vocabulary instruction is, "Is this word **CRITICAL** for my students' understanding of the text?" If the answer to this question is yes, then **that** word needs to be placed on a list of possible words to teach.

Teachers can refer to the selected words to teach as **Goldilocks Words**, because the focus is on words that are just right to teach to support text comprehension.

For more information from Dr. Schnakenberg on word selection, [click here](#).



Click on the graphic for the full version of *Which Words Matter?* from Education Week.

How Do We Teach Vocabulary?

Whether we are preparing for an indirect or direct approach to vocabulary instruction, we must **PLAN, PLAN, PLAN** for what it is that we are going to teach. It is helpful to remember the 6 P's: **Proper Prior Preparation Prevents Poor Performance!** This is extremely important when thinking about vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary instruction is **MOST** effective when the teacher 1) knows the word and its correct pronunciation, 2) knows the meaning of the word as it is used in the story or context in which the students will be working, and 3) has decided on several robust examples and instructional encounters in which to engage the students.

Meaningful, Instructional Encounters

Research shows that in order for students to learn new vocabulary, they need be involved in 12-14 instructional encounters with the new word. (Lawrence, 2009; McKeown et al., 1985; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). Additional research has shown that for some students, as many as 40 meaningful encounters are needed with a word in order for that word to become a part of their vocabulary (McKeown & Kucan, 2010).

A meaningful instructional encounter includes having students interact with a new word in a way that supports word knowledge and overall comprehension of the word in context and in multiple texts that are built on similar contexts. If the purpose of vocabulary instruction is to improve long-term comprehension, the most effective method is to provide students with multiple exposures to words in meaningful contexts (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982). Definitions alone are not enough.

Context

Context can help instructional encounters be more meaningful than others. For example, with the target word *tardy* in the sentence, "The girl was tardy," the context does not provide much evidence to meaning for a student who does not already know what *tardy* means. However, the sentence, "The student was 5 minutes tardy again today, so his teacher was upset," provides much better support to help the learner infer word meaning.

Morphology

Morphology can also help instructional encounters be more meaningful than others. For example, the word *compose* is related to but not the same as the words *decompose* and *composition* – they are actually morphological derivatives. If we help students make semantic connections between words, we can help strengthen their knowledge and understanding of the words in context. Research suggests that students with better morphological awareness have better vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2008). Therefore, we advise teachers to use a range of words related to the target word and to explicitly discuss **how** affixes (prefixes such as *re-* and suffixes such as *-ly*) change the meaning of the target word. These strategies can deepen students' knowledge of the target word and provide them with tools for analyzing and understanding other unfamiliar but related words.


A Routine for Explicit Vocabulary Instruction


In order to effectively teach vocabulary in an **indirect** way, it is best for teachers to plan how to provide support when new or unfamiliar words are introduced. For example, when reading aloud to students and the word *gasp* is encountered, the teacher might actually make a gasping noise for students to hear. In order to be more explicit, the teacher might read the word *gasp*, make a gasping noise, and then say: "gasp means to catch ones breath suddenly."

To teach vocabulary in a **direct** way, a six-step routine for explicit vocabulary instruction is suggested. Research has shown that direct and explicit vocabulary instruction is an effective way for students to acquire vocabulary knowledge. Teaching words systematically and explicitly will help students increase their oral and reading vocabularies. A high level of student engagement is critical throughout explicit vocabulary instruction; students need multiple opportunities to interact with the new word and its meaning.

For a descriptive example of how to implement the routine, [click here](#).

Steps for Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Steps	Tips														
1. Have students say the word.															
2. Provide a definition of the word using student-friendly explanations and visuals .	Use a sticky note to help plan your instruction. 														
3. Have students discuss what is known about the word.															
4. Provide examples and nonexamples of the word.															
5. Engage in deep-processing activities by asking questions , using graphic organizers , or having students act out the word.	<p>Choose a deep-processing word from the box. Using a sticky note, plan questions and/or activities that incorporate the word.</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="2">Deep Processing Words</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Compare</td> <td>Decide</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Categorize</td> <td>Justify</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Design</td> <td>Create</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Contrast</td> <td>Verify</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Rate</td> <td>Imagine</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Recommend</td> <td>Predict</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Remember the</p> <p>"Seven-Up" Rule:</p> <p>Powerful sentences are seven words and up!</p>	Deep Processing Words		Compare	Decide	Categorize	Justify	Design	Create	Contrast	Verify	Rate	Imagine	Recommend	Predict
Deep Processing Words															
Compare	Decide														
Categorize	Justify														
Design	Create														
Contrast	Verify														
Rate	Imagine														
Recommend	Predict														
6. Scaffold students to create powerful sentences with the new word.															

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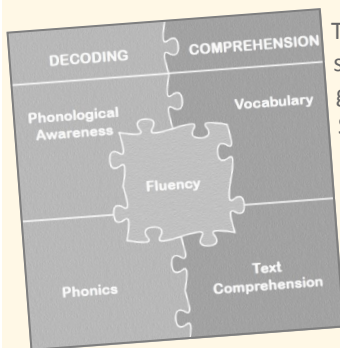
Keep In Mind...

When thinking about what to include in vocabulary instruction, it is important that we remember to:

- Teach vocabulary throughout the day and across content areas.
- Teach word meanings directly.
- Create opportunities for interactive classroom talk.
- Use multiple strategies to involve students in active exploration of words.
- Engage students in activities that require them to determine relationships among, between, and within words.
- Engage students in discussions of words, their meanings, and their uses, usually through read-alouds.
- Make connections to students' background knowledge.
- Ensure that students encounter new words multiple times.
- Use semantic maps and graphic organizers.
- Use examples and nonexamples.
- Explain synonyms and antonyms.

Students Who Do Not Read Outside of

The amount of time spent reading and the amount of text read are important. For example, a student who reads 21 minutes per day outside of school reads almost 2 million words per year. A student who reads less than one minute per day outside of school reads only 8,000 to 21,000 words per year.



There is a significant gap in the vocabulary knowledge that some students bring to the primary grades (Hart & Risley, 2003). That gap continues to widen as students progress through school. Students who lack adequate vocabulary have difficulty getting meaning from what they read, so they read less because they find reading difficult. Weak decoding skills (phonemic awareness, phonics, word study, word identification, and fluency) also contribute to the gap between how much good and poor readers will read and encounter new vocabulary. This relationship is illustrated in the puzzle graphic. [Click here](#) for more information.

A Final Word

Planning is SO important when teaching vocabulary! It's challenging to come up with interesting sentences that provide context for target words, as well as thinking about how to make connections to morphology between words that students have learned and will learn. It is important that all planning happens prior to lessons and that teachers work together to make the most of their instruction.

Check It Out!

Check out these online resources for vocabulary instruction

To identify high-frequency cross-content words:

- The Academic Word List www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist
- Word Count www.wordcount.org/main.php

To create student-friendly word definitions:

- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English www.ldoceonline.com
- Merriam-Webster's Word Central www.wordcentral.com

To support morphological skills and word learning strategies:

- Visuword Online Graphical Dictionary www.visuwords.com/search
- WordSift www.wordsift.com

The TPRI **Intervention Activities Guide** offers fun and inventive activities to inspire vocabulary learning. [Blackline Masters](#) that accompany some of these activities are located at www.tpri.org.



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